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THE NATURE OF BEAUTY

The sense of beauty is the effective source of conduct. Our capacity for appreciating the well-rounded unities of experience furnishes us with the only ultimate ground for criticism and the only never-failing source of inspiration. Beauty abides in organic completeness, whether of thoughts or of things. The smallest cameo as well as the world philosophy of a Spinoza are both expressions for the beauty of truth. The intimate self-communings of a lonely soul as well as the onward sweep of a nation's progress are alike inspired by the truth of beauty. There is nothing animate or inanimate, spiritual or physical, which can evade this magic touch of the mind's illuminating activity.

Beauty abounds in nature. The environment of primitive man, like the remote centres of primitive life to-day, was certainly rich in beautiful scenes and vistas. Only when man became 'civilized,' as we say, did natural beauty give way to practical ugliness — the woods and fields to the factory and the dump-heap. Utilitarian ends have become dominant, and the natural poetry of simple endeavor is lost. The pastoral and military life has given way to the complex ugliness of our highly organized urban existence.

A strange paradox, it would seem. Why is it that man, intellectually developed, having a capacity for esthetic appreciation which his more primitive ancestor could not have possessed, should nevertheless surround himself with manufactured objects and perversions of nature which are essentially ugly? The answer is not difficult, yet it reveals an underlying paradox which is still more far-reaching.

The intellectual maturity of man means an advance from relative simplicity to complexity, from conduct which is direct and straightforward to conduct which is indirect and circuitous. As Spencer has taught us, both organic and intellectual development signifies a progress from 'homogeneity to heterogeneity.' The primitive man dwells in a state of nature, in the midst of an organic unity which is Nature herself.

The man of to-day dwells also in nature, but nature modified and made artificial by his own endeavors. It is a nature in which trees have been felled, roadways graded, houses built, waterways cut, and even the earth disemboweled of its ores and rocks.

As we look out from a hill-top near a city, we may, perchance, see in one direction only the mountains, the lowlands, and the foliage of nature's abundant growth, much as they were designed by the Great Artificer himself. But how different when we look across the town! Here, everywhere are the evidences of man's handiwork: the compact mass of buildings, the intersecting streets, and over all a pall of heavy smoke. The one view reveals nature in her primitive simplicity and organic unity, the other a complex of objects, each perhaps possessed of a certain unity of its own, but lacking any especial coördination.

The natural world has a characteristic harmony of color, and the gradations of her coloring are soft and pleasing. The town glares at us with abrupt patches of red and blue and yellow, put there by the hand of man, with regard only for the several objects which are so colored. The eye searches in vain for any simple unity. All is mixed and contrasted; there has been no thought for any effect of the whole. If we would find the artistic here, we must seek it either in the objects themselves, considered separately, or else in some vista which has gained softness of tone and outline in the dusk of twilight or the faint illumination of the dawn. One may well recall how Whistler chose these aspects of the waterways of London, otherwise crude and ugly, to reproduce in his exquisitely beautiful etchings. How delicately, too, he has described them in his 'Ten O'Clock Lecture':—

“And when the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry, as with a veil, and the poor buildings lose themselves in the dim sky, and the tall chimneys become campanili, and the warehouses are palaces in the night, and fairyland is before us—then the wayfarer hastens home; the working man and the one of pleasure, cease to understand, as they have ceased to see, and Nature, who, for once, has sung in tune, sings her exquisite song to the artist alone, her son and her master—her son in that he loves her, her master in that he knows her.”

The secret of our unbeautiful surroundings is explained by the complex character of our endeavors, the practical and indirect mode of our attack upon nature. No artistic effect is intended in the festooning of our streets with wires, but a purely practical end. The sweet song of the birds is drowned by the noisy rumbling of heavy wagons and the raucous horn of the automobile. And so, while man in his maturer state becomes more capable of appreciating esthetic effects, he is also compelled to seek for them in occasional vistas, or to construct them for himself in definite works of art.

Yet, despite the beauty of nature undefiled, and the efforts of man to produce works of art in little, it would seem that few give much heed to beauty. We are apt to think that people of good taste form a sort of exclusive circle in comparison with the vulgar horde of commonplace humanity. And then we comfort ourselves, it may be, with the thought that we, at least, are not of the rank and file. But our self-esteem is destined to suffer a shock, if we be of open mind and critically disposed, for we shall find that this small circle of ours, this limited coterie of understanding ones with whom we seem to have the sense of taste in common, is duplicated by many other circles of society each composed of a limited number of kindred spirits, and each member thereof impressed equally with his own capacity for true appreciation. The logical conclusion leads to that ancient principle: *de gustibus non est disputandum*; for, finding that we cannot proclaim the canons of beauty on the basis of the judgment of a few highly cultured minds, we fall back, in despair, upon the notion that each man is the measure of his own desire.

It is clear that neither point of view is favorable to an exact treatment of art and its appreciation, and for the sake of such treatment we may be thankful that neither is true. The canons of art are not laid down forevermore by the few who assert themselves as artistic dictators after the manner of Ruskin; nor is there an entire absence of such canons. The truth is, first, that esthetic enjoyment is much more prevalent than one is generally disposed to admit. Esthetic appreciation is a state of mind common to all, although expressed, of course, more

often and more completely in some minds than in others. In the second place, we find that the attitude is not complex, but is characterized, rather, by a relative simplicity, — a simplicity manifest in a sense of the fitness of things. It is the conformity of ideas in a thought sequence, the conformity of words, images, and thoughts in literature, the conformity of melody, rhythm, and harmony in music, the conformity of pictorial imagery in painting and sculpture, that awakens this attitude in us. The true essence of the Esthetic lies in the comprehension of something achieved — a step on the way, as it were; something represented to us as complete within the limits which it sets for itself. In other words, it is an ideal become manifest through thought and perception. The purpose of art is to produce such concrete ideals, in the contemplation of which we may sink ourselves, freed of all active desire and purpose.

This attitude which we term Esthetic is in constant evolution; originally simple, it becomes cultivated as the individual attains cultivation. As the opportunities for esthetic enjoyment increase, it grows more important, more critical, wider in scope and more thoroughly satisfying. The delight of children and savages in bright colors, loud noises, and striking rhythms is surely esthetic. The interest of southern races in garish and piquant sensations, as may be noted in their love of color, noise, highly spiced food and drink, has often been compared with the more neutral tastes of northern peoples. This does not merely signify that the southern races demand more exciting stimuli than the northern peoples, it reveals also a larger interest in sensation for its own sake; and if this larger interest tends to blunt the sensibility for fine distinctions, we must not forget that it brings into play a wealth of colors, sounds, tastes, and movements which is quite unknown to the more phlegmatic denizen of a northern clime.

Yet these are but the simple pleasures of the moment. They possess no universal and definite validity,—the validity inseparable from the work of art. The exercise of a critical faculty tends to rob them of their esthetic value, for in themselves, sensations are crude and meaningless, and the critical mind demands that a meaning shall be apparent. They are,

therefore, only the ingredients from which a work of art may be evolved.

A work of art either solves some problem before us, as is the case with literature and music, or it presents to us directly a significant situation completely represented, as in a painting or statue. In both cases the only demand upon us is that we shall adopt a sympathetic attitude and try to comprehend our experience. No demand is made that we should either attempt to improve upon the experience, or consider it as a motive for action. To become esthetic, an object must interest us in itself, and it is thus immediately distinguished from all things non-esthetic by the fact that our dominant interest is in *it*, and not in anything more remote, to which it might lead us in thought or action. An object which stirs us into active participation, ceases at once to be esthetic, as when, for instance, the 'gallery god' takes a hand in the drama by shouting to the heroine at a critical moment to beware the villain disguised in the black beard!

Out of the simple esthetic impression — which is the element of beauty — the work of art grows by a process of complication always involving a greater and completer unity. The esthetic standards by which art is judged are just these principles of 'unity in complication' as they manifest themselves in the different branches of artistic endeavor and in the different phases of artistic appreciation. The evolution of the work of art is, of course, paralleled by the evolution of the audience,—the person of taste who is intuitively alive to beauty and possessed of a capacity for critical discrimination,—as well as by the development of the artist in ability to express his esthetic ideals. The measure of an artist's clarity of thought is manifest directly in his works. To know a thing artistically, one must be able to express it,—the writer or the speaker in words, the musician in tones, the painter on canvas, and the sculptor in marble or bronze. Those who are unable to express themselves adequately and clearly in one of these ways, lack the genius of the artist.

Yet if few possess the natural taste which an environment of culture makes possible, and still fewer the productive ability of

the artist, all of us may, in some degree, develop our critical faculty for judgment and appreciation, and so supplement what our early experience has failed to make evident. The tendency of such education is all towards a greater simplicity and significance in everything that we think and do, in the very clothes that we wear, and especially in those things which we have about us. Critical principles, once formulated, act as a permanent bias to guide our actions and thoughts; increased experience only tends to make them fuller, clearer, and more completely adequate.

These principles which thus guide our intellectual lives and shape our esthetic ideals are grounded in ethical and religious experience; not, to be sure, in narrow and dogmatic doctrine, but in those broad, rational truths which lead one to act toward one's fellowman with honesty and kindliness of thought, and teach one to apprehend merit wherever it is met. Thus our entire mode of conduct is affected, and we are led to do things which are right because they are recognized to be the things which lead toward that esthetic ideal for which we are all consciously or unconsciously striving. No act is esthetic in itself, yet all acts are influenced by such esthetic ideals as we may possess, and consequently tend towards the realization of those ideals both in our own lives and in the lives of those about us.

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